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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to develop a reliable measure for assessing the variations in reunion responses exhibited by preschoolers and to determine whether individual differences were consistent over multiple observations. A total of 22 preschool children (13 boys and 9 girls) participated in the study; their reunion behaviors were observed on six occasions over a 7-week period. For each reunion episode, ratings were made of the child's initial reunion response and of all subsequent reunion behaviors. Used to record observations was the Preschool Reunion Behavior Scale, a measure consisting of 15 categories describing behaviors and indicating their affective quality along degrees from negative to positive. Contextual information was also recorded. It was found that the most frequently occurring reunion responses were affectively positive ones. Children showed the same specific reunion behavior 50 percent of the time; consistency in the general emotional tone of reunions was found in 72 percent of observations. No sex differences were found in specific reunion behaviors or in their consistency (whether mother or father was the retrieving parent was immaterial). Findings indicated that preschool children show a much broader range of greeting behaviors than do younger children. The consistency of individual differences suggests that these responses may reflect some stable dimension of parent/child interaction. (A copy of the scale is included.) (RH)

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THE RANGE AND CONSISTENCY OF PRESCHOOLERS' REUNION RESPONSES IN DAY CARE

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ABSTRACT

A 15-category Preschool Reunion Behavior Scale was developed to appraise the reunion responses of preschool children in day care and their consistency on multiple occasions. Twenty-two boys and girls were observed six times over a seven-week period during reunions with a consistent parent. Children showed the same specific reunion behavior 50% of the time; consistency in the general emotional tone of reunions was 72%. There were no differences in specific reunion behaviors or in their consistency for boys or girls, or whether mother or father was the retrieving parent. Taken together, these findings indicate that preschoolers show a much broader range of greeting behaviors than do younger children, and the consistency of individual differences suggests that these responses may reflect some stable dimension of parent-child interaction.

THE RANGE AND CONSISTENCY OF PRESCHOOLERS' REUNION RESPONSES IN DAY CARE

Recently there has been much research interest in the effects of day care on the mother-child relationship (see Belsky and Steinberg, 1978, for a review). As dependent measures, researchers have often assessed the child's reunion behaviors toward the parent either in the naturalistic home (e.g., Brookhart and Hock, 1976) or day care setting (e.g., Blanchard and Main, 1979; Ragozin, 1980), or in the laboratory-based Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall, 1978; see Blehar, 1974; Brookhart and Hock, 1976; Doyle, 1975; Moskowitz, Schwartz and Corsini, 1977; Portnoy and Simmons, 1978; Ragozin, 1980; Roopnarine and Lamb, 1978). As an index of the parent-child relationship, variations in reunion responses are thought to reflect important differences in the feelings and expectations of children toward their parents (cf. Ainsworth et al., 1978). Since much of this work is based on the behaviors of infants and toddlers, however, little is known about the range of reunion responses evinced by preschoolers in day care or the consistency of individual differences in these behaviors on multiple occasions. The latter is an important consideration pertaining to the validity of using reunion responses to infer general characteristics of parent-child relationships. This study was designed to address both of these questions.

The reunion is a potentially useful period for studying parent-child interactions in day care. It is an important transition in the child's daily routine and forms the bridge between the day care and home environments. Thus the way children greet their parents at the end of the day may reflect their affective responses to this transition and their expectations for what will occur at home. Positive greetings may reflect pleasure at the parent's return and an eagerness to return home, while more ambivalent or negative reunion responses may reflect a different set of expectations.

Much of the research concerned with the reunion behaviors of children in day care has focused on infants and toddlers and has thus employed a simple taxonomy of greeting responses, such as proximity-seeking, touching, distal interactions, avoidance and resistance (e.g., Blanchard and Main, 1979; Doyle, 1975; Ragozin, 1980). Unfortunately, researchers studying older children have tended to use similar measures, despite the more sophisticated cognitive and behavioral competencies of the preschooler (e.g., Moskowitz et al., 1977; Portnoy and Simmons, 1978; Roopnarine and Lamb, 1978). These competencies should alter our appraisal and interpretation of their reunion behaviors. Maccoby and Feldman (1972) and other researchers have noted, for example, that distal behaviors increase and contact-seeking decreases with age in reunion episodes, suggesting that children develop more diverse and independent modes of greeting the parent as they grow older, including verbally-mediated modes. Thus the meaning of contact-seeking may be much different when observed in a four-year-old compared to a one-year-old. Furthermore, the more advanced cognitive abilities of the preschooler, including early role-taking skills, awareness of temporal relations and verbal mediation capacities, alter their understanding of separation experiences and broaden their response options during reunions (see Marvin, 1977). In short, the competencies of the preschooler warrant assessment tools which take these into account if individual differences are to be meaningfully appraised. Thus one purpose of this research was to develop such a measure and determine whether it could be reliably applied to the reunion responses of preschoolers in their day care environments.

The interpretation of individual differences in reunion behaviors usually assumes that these variations tap some consistent dimension of parent-child interaction. While this may be so, many factors in the day care environment mitigate against such temporal consistency. Transient situational influences -- such as whether the child was engaged in a favorite activity at the time of the parent's arrival -- may influence the reunion interaction. In addition, the location of the reunion (i.e., in an

indoor playroom or outdoor playground) and the availability of alternative activities may affect the child's behavior. It is thus unclear whether the greeting observed on a single occasion (which is typical for most research studies) reflects a stable aspect of the parent-child relationship or more transient factors.

Two studies have examined the consistency of the reunion behaviors of infants and toddlers in day care. Blanchard and Main (1979) assessed avoidance during three reunion episodes over a three-week period for 21 one- to two-year-olds. Scores for only two of their observations were significantly correlated. Cohen and Ambron (1980) observed 30 infants of the same age during reunions on the first, fifth, and tenth days of care, and found a moderate degree of association on measures of proximity-seeking, contact-maintenance, avoidance and resistance on each occasion. Thus far, no studies have examined the consistency of individual differences in reunion responses among preschoolers. In doing so, we observed reunions on six occasions over a seven-week period to permit a clearer test of stability.

To summarize, the goals of this study were to develop a reliable measure for assessing the variations in reunion responses exhibited by preschoolers, and to determine whether individual differences were consistent over multiple observations.

METHOD

Subjects

Twenty-two children (9 girls) participated in this study. Equal numbers were enrolled in two university-based, full-time day care programs, with approximately equal proportions of boys and girls at each center. Children ranged in age from 34 to 48 months, and had been at the center no longer than one year at the time of the study. There were 11 mothers and 10 fathers who consistently retrieved the children at the end of the day; the remaining child was retrieved by a grandmother who lived in the home. Subject recruitment was through letters distributed at the centers following the approval of the directors. Approximately 73% of those contacted agreed

to participate.

Procedure

The Preschool Reunion Behavior Scale was developed through observation of reunion episodes at several day care centers, consultation with day care practitioners, and examination of relevant research. It consists of 15 categories ranging from affectively negative to positive reunion behaviors with accompanying behaviorally-based definitions (see Table 1). The measure was pretested on a different sample of 18 three-year-olds at a church-based day care center prior to use in this study. We found that it could be used reliably by highly-trained undergraduate research assistants and, with minor revisions, satisfactorily encompassed the range of reunion behaviors exhibited by these children.

Insert Table 1 about here

The reunion behaviors of the children in this study were observed on six occasions over a seven-week period. Observers distributed their observations of each child broadly over the assessment period: no child was observed more than twice in one week, or consistently on the same day of the week. The only constraints imposed on parental behavior were that a) one parent consistently retrieved the child throughout the assessment period[1] and b) the adult permitted up to ten minutes between their arrival and departure with the child. The latter request was designed to avoid unnecessarily hasty or abrupt reunion episodes. Teachers at the day care centers were asked not to intrude in the child's reunion activities, if possible.

A highly-trained undergraduate research assistant rated the behaviors of children at each center. For each reunion episode, ratings of the child's initial reunion response (defined as the first behavior directed to the parent after first becoming aware of the parent's arrival) and all subsequent reunion behaviors were performed. Contextual information was also recorded.

A third trained observer participated in sessions on three occasions to assess inter-rater reliability: at the end of training, at the midpoint of data collection, and in follow-up observations after the end of the study. Independent ratings of the child's initial reunion response (which is the focus of our analysis) yielded exact agreement on category assignment 90% of the time.

RESULTS

The most frequently-occurring reunion responses were affectively positive ones: Proximal Greeting Without (24%) and With (15%) Close Physical Contact. Showing Off (13%) and Passive Resistance (9%) were other frequent reunion behaviors. In contrast, Clinging and Extortion occurred relatively infrequently, the latter probably because it entails more sophisticated cognitive competencies than are typical for this age-range. Grouping categories according to their affective tone, we found that 50% of the reunion responses entailed affectively positive categories (i.e., PG, PP, IP and DG), 29% were negative (i.e., AO, RP, RA, AA, EX, RG, PA, CL), and the remaining 21% were neutral, variable, or uncertain in affective tone (i.e., HD, DD, and SO).

To examine the consistency of initial reunion responses over the six observations, we identified for each child the proportion of observations characteristic of the modal reunion response category. This figure ranged from 17% (a different behavior on each occasion) to 100% (uniformity across all observations), with a mean of 50%. A one-sample, independent t-test revealed that this level of consistency was significantly higher than expected had children shown no stability in their responses ($t(21)=7.34$, $p < .001$), and was also significantly higher than expected had children been consistent one-third of the time ($t(21)=3.27$, $p < .01$). There were no significant differences between boys and girls in the consistency of their reunion behaviors ($t(20)=0.88$), nor were there differences in the consistency of reunions displayed toward mothers and fathers ($t(19)=2.09$) or at the two day care centers ($t(20)=1.38$).

We were also interested in the consistency of the emotional tone underlying

the six reunion episodes. Grouping the 15 categories into the three affective clusters described above, we found that the average proportion of observations showing a consistent emotional tone was 72%. As before, there were no differences by gender of the child ($t(20)=0.05$), parent to whom they were directed ($t(19)=0.59$), or day care center ($t(20)=0.26$).

A separate set of contingency table analyses (with Yates' correction) was conducted to determine whether there were important variations in the types of reunion behaviors displayed by preschoolers in this study. These revealed that boys did not differ from girls in their initial reunion behaviors ($\chi^2(14)=11.84$, ns), nor were there differences in the behaviors displayed toward mothers and fathers ($\chi^2(14)=10.04$, ns). However, there was a difference between the two day care centers ($\chi^2(14)=25.41$, $p < .05$), with the children at one center exhibiting greater physical contact during proximal greetings than those at the other center. When the PP and PG categories were combined, this difference was small and nonsignificant.

Much of the research concerned with reunion behaviors seeks to identify broader patterns or constellations of behaviors by which individual differences among children may be identified (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978). Since the preschoolers in this study were so consistent in their reunion responses, we sought to determine whether, by examining each child's initial reunion behaviors across the six observation, such constellations could characterize a major proportion of these children. We identified two such patterns. First, a constellation of PP, PG, and DG (i.e., the positive reunion responses) characterized the behaviors of 60% (N=13) of the sample. Second, a combination of PA and PG typified 14% (N=3) of the sample. The remaining 26% of the sample could not be adequately encompassed within an overall pattern of reunion responses.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that preschool children show much diversity in their reunion greetings, reflecting a broader range of response options than is

true of infants and toddlers. Clearly, measures based on the simpler behaviors of younger children miss much of the meaningful variability in preschoolers' reunion behaviors, as reflected in our 15-category measure. Even so, these children exhibited, on the average, the same kind of specific greeting on three out of six occasions (i.e., 50% of the time). Children were even more consistent when reunions were appraised in terms of their underlying emotional tone, reflecting the fact that diversity in specific behaviors sometimes emerges from a consistent emotional reaction. In short, children were consistent in their manner of greeting the parent on reunion.

Such consistency is remarkable in view of the many factors which can alter a child's reunion behaviors from one occasion to another, including engagement in a favorite activity, availability of playmates, access to toys, location (indoors or outside), preceding events, and the like. These factors were not inconsequential for the children we studied, but did not appear to strongly affect their initial greeting to the parent. It is also noteworthy that a large proportion of these greetings were positive, since they occurred at the end of the day when the child was likely to be tired or mildly stressed. It was evident that despite this, most children were glad to see their parents. Finally, there was little variability in the reunion behaviors evinced by boys and girls, and it mattered little whether mother or father was the retrieving parent. This was perhaps unsurprising, since the social expectations which may underlie variations in these reunion behaviors would not be expected to vary with gender (cf. Lamb, 1978).

These observations suggest that reunion responses tap a stable dimension of parent-child interaction which is little affected by transient situational or organismic factors. It remains for future research to determine more specifically how individual differences in these reunion behaviors should be interpreted by studying their relationships to other aspects of parent-child interaction. As with the resesearch on the security of infant-mother attachment relationships (cf. Ainsworth et

al., 1978), the external correlates of individual differences in specific reunion behaviors (or in behavior constellations) are likely to tell us whether such behaviors are useful indicies of more general aspects of parent-child relationships.

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Table 1

PRESCHOOL REUNION BEHAVIOR SCALE

Category Name	Symbol	Behavioral Description
I. Acting Out	AO	Child uses negative attention-getting devices, such as hitting other children, disobeying school rules, etc.
II. Resistant		
1. Passive	RP	Child exhibits delayed compliance, with little eye contact or physical or verbal contact with the parent.
2. Active	RA	Verbal or physical abuse directed to the parent, such as temper tantrums, crying, "I don't want to go!"
III. Active Avoidant	AV	Child runs away, hides, avoids reunion with the parent.
IV. Extortion	EX	Child seeks bribery in return for cooperation (e.g., taking the center's toy, "What will you give me?" etc.)
V. Regression	RG	Child displays developmentally regressed behavior (e.g., wets pants, "can't walk," goes limp, can't do self-help skills such as tieing shoes or putting on coat)
VI. Passive Avoidant	PA	Child ignores parent's entrance and greeting, but may make brief eye contact.
VII. Clinging	CL	Child hangs on tightly to parent's leg, arm, etc. without positive facial expression.
VIII. Hurried Departure	HD	Child attempts by physical or verbal means to rush the parent out of the center.
IX. Delayed Departure	DD	Child makes a non-negative request of the parent for time to complete an activity.
X. Showing Off	SO	Child displays positive attention-getting behaviors, such as demonstrating physical talents, showing parent what they made, etc.
XI. Distal Greeting	DG	Child makes eye contact and offers a brief verbal greeting, but no physical contact or approach.
XII. Involves Parent	IP	Child involved parent in an interactive activity, such as a game.

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Table 1 (con't)

Category Name	Symbol	Behavioral Description
XIII. Proximal Greeting		
1. With Close Physical Contact	PP	Child approaches parent to hug or kiss; is picked up or asks to be picked up.
2. Without Close Physical Contact	PG	Same as above, except that physical contact is limited (e.g., hand-holding).